

The Way of the Warrior in Interwar Japan

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If the world had been a family in the twentieth century, Japan would have been the little brother, unsure of how to behave, but heavily influenced by how its older siblings acted. Japan's rapid industrialization helped it to achieve military and economic parity with many of its surrounding states, allowing the tiny island nation to win the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 and the Russo-Japanese War ten years later. These victories, especially against Russia, surprised the world and lent Japan a new air of legitimacy as a major military power. In occupying this new role, Japan would go on to fight against the Central Powers in the First World War, declaring war on Germany in 1914 to honour its alliance with Britain.¹ Germany's territory in China was surrendered to the Japanese in a matter of weeks, ending Japan's involvement in the war quickly and decisively. This easy victory instilled in the Japanese a sense of confidence; after 45 years as a minor power, watching the rest of the world operate, Japan now considered itself among the major players on the world stage.² Indeed, its victory against Russia in 1905 and Germany in 1919 solidified Japan as such in the eyes of the Western powers. However, in the span of 25 years, Japan would systemically alienate each of its newfound friends. How could a nation so promising in its appearance on the world stage, so quick to grasp the ways of the new world in which it found itself, so surprisingly adept at modern war and economics, lose every ally it had in such short order? Why did the West go from brisk trade and military alliance with Japan to implicit displeasure with it? Why did Japan "switch sides" in the interwar period?

The answer is threefold. First, while the European powers spent 400 years developing their culture through exploration, colonization, and imperialism, Japan was looking inward, nurturing its unique cultural and philosophical views which continues to influence its people into the twenty-first century. Second, when Japan stepped into the wider world and saw each nation as a sprawling empire, it was forced by its newfound neighbours to embrace their imperial attitudes and industrialize quickly, a process that imprinted a very rigid worldview upon the Japanese, which would prove inflexible in the face of new ideologies. Third, once its European allies moved on from imperialism after the First World War, Japan was seen as both inferior to the West and as a threat to Wilsonian idealism for clinging to the imperial ways it had learned from those same allies some 50 years prior. These three factors formed the backbone of Japanese identity in the interwar years. They would also, ultimately, push Japan down the path to confrontation with the nations that had ushered it into the modern era.

To understand the actions of any state, one must explore the cultural history of its people. The mindset of a nation develops over time, in response to many stimuli. In Japan, that mindset can be summed up in two words: *Bushidō* and *Shinto*. Normally defined,

¹ Thomas W. Burkman, *Japan and the League of Nations: Empire and World Order, 1914-1938* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 4.

² Ibid.

respectively, as a philosophy and a religion, these two concepts became enmeshed during Japan's long feudal age. Both are unique to Japan, though informed, along with many Japanese concepts, by the works of Chinese philosophers like Confucius.³ Defining and understanding the importance of *Shinto* and *Bushidō* provides great insight to the Japanese perspective, as they are defining characteristics of the culture, and exert influence on many aspects of Japanese thought, extending far beyond their roots in Japan's feudal past. As a prominent Japanese politician, Nitobe Inazō, wrote in 1899, "without understanding Feudalism and Bushidō, the moral ideas of modern Japan are a sealed volume."⁴

Japan's central philosophy was solidified at the end of the twelfth century CE with the rise of the samurai and founding of the first shogunate in 1192.⁵ Before this date, power in Japan was held by the emperor, considered to be a direct descendent of the sun goddess, Amaterasu. The shogun became *de facto* head of state after 1192, creating a military government to replace the older aristocratic one. This placed control of the state firmly in the hands of the warrior class, blending aristocratic identity with warrior ideals. The total control that the warrior class held ensured that their code, Bushidō, would be pressed upon the people of Japan. That code quickly formed into the philosophy that would define Japan for almost 800 years. *Bushidō* took hold and never completely let go. From 1192 to 1868, the leaders of Japan were born, raised, ruled and died with the guiding principles of *Bushidō*.

Bushidō literally translates to "military knight ways" from *bushi* (a mounted warrior) and *dō* (a philosophical path),⁶ but is often anglicized as the "Way of the Warrior." The control of Japan was held by men of the landed military class, who, unlike in Western feudalism, were warriors first and statesmen second.⁷ Early *Bushidō* was heavily influenced by aspects of Buddhism and Confucianism; a calm trust in fate was expected, as was friendliness with the concept of death.⁸ Japan's religion exerted great influence on *Bushidō* as well. *Shinto*, the "Way of the Gods," placed emphasis on the divine nature of the emperor, and, since the emperor represented the nation, all of Japan.⁹ The tradition of ancestor worship contributed to a sense of deeply ingrained loyalty, not only to the sovereign, but to any figure in a position of power, especially within the family structure. These traditional religious roots effectively tied *Bushidō* to both religion and the past, thereby cementing it in the minds of individuals and the nation.

As the philosophy became more and more a part of Japanese identity, it began to adopt new meaning. Children were raised on tales of famous warriors, the battles they fought, and the ways they exhibited valour, fortitude, bravery, fearlessness and courage.¹⁰ The concept of *giri* emerged, meaning "Right Reason." At first, *giri* functioned as the idea of a moral imperative, meant to govern peoples' mannerisms and ensure morality, but it

³ Nitobe Inazō, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, 13th ed. (Tokyo: Teibi Publishing Company, 1908), 15.

⁴ Ibid, vi.

⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁶ Ibid, 3.

⁷ Ikegami, *Taming of the Samurai*, 5.

⁸ Yamamoto Tsunetomo, *Hagakure: The Secret Wisdom of the Samurai*, trans. Alexander Bennet (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 1.2.

⁹ Anesaki Masaharu, *History of Japanese Religion, with Special Reference to the Social and Moral Life of the Nation* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 1963), 6.

¹⁰ Nitobe, *Soul of Japan*, 30

morphed into a type of social bind, facilitating moral sacrifice for the good of the family or state.¹¹ This transformation was looked at with some disdain by certain members of society, but its continuation throughout Japan's feudal age and into its modern age is indicative of its resiliency in the mind of the population.

The concept of honour is central to *Bushidō*, and since the philosophy is so closely related to the warrior class, preserving honour often meant reacting with violence and courage.¹² The men who ruled Japan lived with this notion of honour for hundreds of years. The interplay between honour and shame was the central dichotomy of Japanese society; honour represented aggressive individualism and competition, and shame took on the meaning of conformity. Competition and collaboration formed the centrepiece of Japanese interpersonal relationships at the time,¹³ a concept that, when brought into the modern era, would mesh very well with emerging ideas of capitalism and democracy. The legacy of *ie*, or the "autonomy of the household," would also lend its values to the modern state of Japan once its claims were contested by other nations. In the first half of the twentieth century, Japan had its autonomy challenged by evolving Western values and the leaders that expressed them. The samurai notion of competition led Japan to claim territory and start an empire at a time when the rest of the world was giving that practice up. The fight between individualism and conformity could be clearly seen in the Japanese approach to world politics; their desire to collaborate led them to be one of the first to join the League of Nations,¹⁴ but their competitive nature compelled them to opportunistically seize territory from neighbouring nations during what must have seemed to other states as inappropriate times.

Bushidō could be harsh. Children were often taught endurance and toughness by being refused food or exposed to the elements for long periods of time.¹⁵ A strong sense of honour meant that any sort of underhanded dealing or crooked enterprise, though assuredly present in society, was considered extremely shameful.¹⁶ A system of punishment evolved during the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867) called *kenka ryoseibai*, an extremely harsh method that punished equally the antagonist of a crime and anyone who attempted to defend himself.¹⁷ The only way to avoid punishment was to remain passive, a solution that many samurai found to be the incorrect thing to do. Many chose to defend their honour, knowing full well that the punishment for doing so could be death.¹⁸ This example is a good metaphor for the way Japan handled itself in the twentieth century; like the samurai of old, Japan, cognizant of the rules set out by the League of Nations and understanding their import, continually ignored them in favour of what it deemed morally and economically right.

One might think that these examples are too distant in Japanese history to have any sort of effect on twentieth century politics. However, like any other self-realized nation, the Japanese have a very long cultural memory. Just as the Americans today tell and retell

¹¹ Ibid, 22.

¹² Ikegami, *Taming of the Samurai*, 30.

¹³ Ibid 5

¹⁴ Burkman, *Japan and the League*, xi.

¹⁵ Nitobe, *Soul of Japan*, 27.

¹⁶ Ibid, 20.

¹⁷ Ikegami, *Taming of the Samurai*, 143.

¹⁸ Ibid.

stories of the founding fathers and the road to independence, the Japanese tell stories that epitomize their cultural heritage.¹⁹

One such story, possibly the most famous in Japan, is that of the 47 Ronin, a tale of revenge and ritual suicide that took place in the first years of the 18th century. The story goes that there were two samurai who disliked one another. For reasons unknown, one drew his sword and attacked the other under the roof of the Shogun's palace, where drawing a weapon was an offence punishable by death. He was compelled to commit *seppuku*, ritual suicide, for his transgression. His house was dissolved and his servants became masterless. 47 of his former retainers, no longer samurai (for samurai were defined by their servile role), were outraged at this injustice and plotted revenge on the man responsible for goading their master to his death. Two years later, the 47 stormed their enemy's villa and slaughtered his entire household. This blatantly illegal act perpetrated by the group earned them all *seppuku*, but it satisfied their sense of honour. After all this had happened, the story began to spread like wildfire, being represented in theatre and song all around the country. The shogun, of course, attempted to censor it, but the story's themes of righteousness and moral obligation appealed to the *Bushidō* spirit of the samurai and the rebellious pipe-dreams of the peasantry. The story of the 47 Ronin remains today one of the most popular cultural legends in Japan, a telling indicator of the value the Japanese place in remembering the past.²⁰

Feudal Japan and the philosophy of *Bushidō* greatly influenced the way their leaders approached modern problems when brought into the industrial age by the West. The samurai ruled Japan when the nation was pulled into the world at large, and they continued to rule it during industrialization, when they struggled to balance old traditions with new ideologies. This was an issue because of the unique nature of Japanese industrialization; unlike other nations that built toward it slowly and embraced it over the course of decades, Japan refused to acknowledge the phenomena for many years and then adopted as much as they could in extremely short order. The rapid nature of Japanese industrialization allowed the nation to retain much of its feudal mindset, leading to a clash between old and new that was far more intense than in Europe. The continuation of one ruling class through this transitory period ensured that old values were used to judge new situations,²¹ to varying degrees of effectiveness.

The values developed during Japan's feudal period impacted their conduct in the modern era. Defeating China in 1895 and Russia in 1905 solidified Japan's place as a power to be reckoned with in the eyes of other nations around the world. These two wars also created a Japanese sphere of influence on mainland China, an important development that would have serious ramifications in the coming decades. Japan again marched to war when fighting broke out in 1914, honouring its alliance with the British.

Japanese participation in the First World War was directed toward the German territory in China. Germany had poured 200 million marks into its Chinese holdings, making them strategic points of interest for the industrially-minded Japanese.²² The

¹⁹ Ibid, 367.

²⁰ F.W.S., "The 47 Ronin," para. 12, The Samurai Archives, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.samurai-archives.com/ronin.html>.

²¹ Ikegami, *Taming of the Samurai*, 338.

²² Burkman, *Japan and the League*, 4.

Germans also presented a threat to newly-won Japanese influence on the continent. In a matter of weeks, Japan pushed the light German garrisons out of China and secured the Shangdong Peninsula for itself.²³ This swift campaign ended the sense of Western (particularly British) paternalism in Japan; no longer did it consider itself a student of the West.²⁴ Japan's assertive nature in these three wars also reflects the lingering aspects of *Bushidō*, still present in the traditional mindset of the ruling class. Japanese concern over their sphere of influence was a manifestation of *ie*, the "autonomy of the household," albeit on a larger scale. By asserting and solidifying its position in East Asia, Japan defined its household and established quite clearly that it was capable of defending that space. This tendency toward defining, claiming and controlling space quickly began to incorporate *giri*, the "Right Reason." In the lead up to the Second World War, Japan's pursuit of an East Asian sphere of domination would be justified by the concept of *giri*, and *ie* would provide the motivation to defend that idea with a degree of fanaticism that surprised many.

Japanese relations with the West began to break down almost immediately after it claimed victory over the Germans in China. In 1915, Japan, in a bid to consolidate its continental power, issued the 21 Demands to China. Under threat of war, the Chinese were asked to recognize Japanese control of Shangdong and Manchuria and to stop leasing territory to other foreign powers. The demands also provided for Japanese economic ambition; railroads were built, companies were merged, and land was leased.²⁵ After asking for a few revisions, which the Japanese granted, China agreed to the demands, knowing full well it could not fight another war against Japan and hope to win. The Western powers, wary of growing Japanese ambition, were not happy about this turn of events and made sure to let Japan know it. Seizing power and land from the Chinese, as Japan had observed other nations doing in previous decades, provided both economic stability and political legitimacy, and contributed to the sense of autonomy that the Japanese state felt entitled to.

The end of the First World War saw the West recoil from the horrors of violence. Democracy flourished and Wilsonian idealism became widespread.²⁶ Unfortunately for Japan, some of these new ideals clashed with many of their own historic values, and those learned in the nineteenth century. Democracy and capitalism meshed well with the dichotomy of collaboration and competition etched into their cultural memory by their long feudal period, but the concepts of self-determination and free world trade put forward by Wilson in the years after the First World War conflicted with the need for the Japanese to have clearly defined hierarchies, rulers, and boundaries. According to Japanese feudal policy and cultural memory, there must always be those in power and those who serve; that concept is central to the philosophy of *Bushidō*, and to the respect of sovereign privilege embedded in *Shinto*. Owing to this fundamental disconnect, the Japanese frequently found themselves marginalized and at odds with the other members of the League of Nations.²⁷ Much of it had to do with race (the Western powers were still uncomfortable with the idea of an Asian nation on par with their own), but a lot of Western hostility was engendered by

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 5.

²⁵ Michael Duffy, "Primary Documents – '21 Demands' Made by Japan to China, 18 January 1915," para 4, [firstworldwar.com](http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/21demands.htm), last modified August 22, 2009, <http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/21demands.htm>.

²⁶ Elise K. Tipton, *Society and the State in Interwar Japan* (London: Routledge, 1997), 5.

²⁷ Burkman, *Japan and the League*, 4.

Japan's insistence on maintaining the principles of the early twentieth century, principles that the West now found to be deplorable. Japan believed it could balance the League's objective of preserving the status quo with its own interests in expanding Japanese influence,²⁸ despite the veiled hostility directed toward it by the other members.

In the 1920s, Japan saw its foreign economic fortunes rise as a result of its Chinese territories. The formerly German holdings had provided quality ship-building ports, allowing the Japanese navy to grow in size and strength, and Japanese investment in local industry had given them 36.3% of the Chinese market by 1919.²⁹ Though the people were often subject to famine as a result of mishandled loans,³⁰ the Japanese had emerged from the First World War far more aware of foreign pressure, if not particularly receptive to it. Japanese politics in the interwar period have been termed *mushisou*, or "ideal-less;" they saw the emerging ideologies of Wilson and Lenin as hypocritical and contradictory to the traditional Japanese values developed during the Tokugawa Shogunate. Japan became disillusioned with the "altruistic" motivation of Wilsonian policy, in particular after being on the losing side of economic deals and treaties.³¹ Despite the 21 Demands being annulled during the Washington Conference of 1921, Japan continued to exploit its territories in China.³²

The same appeasement mentality that enabled Hitler to grow so powerful also had a part to play in the rise of the Japanese Empire, but, ultimately, Japan was pushed toward conflict by its inability to properly reconcile feudal philosophy with modern idealism. Elements of *Bushidō*, infused with ancient *Shinto* tradition and developed over almost 700 years of intense inward scrutiny, persisted in Japan's cultural memory after its industrialization. The concept of household autonomy in particular informed Japanese policy between the World Wars, and the quintessentially Japanese interpretation of honour (that it be maintained through violent and courageous action) was perfectly visible in their seizure of Chinese territory and in its quiet indignation in response to perceived condescendence and insulting political marginalization from the Western powers. In 1931, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations in the face of condemnation toward their invasion of Manchuria, an action undertaken to satisfy territorial claims present since 1905, and to feed the already raging fire of the Japanese industrial complex. This was the beginning of the "fifteen year war,"³³ the conflict that would come to be known by the Japanese as The Pacific War, or, in Europe, The Second World War. Japan's participation in the conflict that would define the rest of the 20th century was predicated upon a 700 year-old philosophy that was twisted by unexpected modernization.

Bibliography

²⁸ Ibid, xii.

²⁹ Ibid, 5.

³⁰ Ibid, .3

³¹ Ibid, 11.

³² Duffy, "Primary Documents," para 4.

³³ Tipton, *Society and the State*, 6.

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